

Controversy over public religious Christmas displays in America is fueled by differing beliefs regarding Christmas and American history.

*The so-called “War on Christmas” has become an annual feature of the holiday season in the U.S., with much of the debate centering around religious displays on publicly-owned property. **David Kyle Johnson** argues that this cultural conflict is fueled by disparate understandings of Christmas and American history between religious conservatives and secular progressives. He concludes that research into the pagan roots of Christmas, the founding of America, and legal precedent, shows that historical fact tends to fall on the side of secularists arguing against government-sponsored religious displays at Christmas.*



The American political controversy over Christmas is multifaceted, but only one issue has made its way to the Supreme Court: the display of religious Christmas symbols, such as a nativity scene, or “crèche,” on publicly owned or government property (such as a courthouse lawn).

Why the controversy? Most “religious conservatives” feel that objections to such displays are an affront to Christmas, Christianity and the nation. Most “secular (non-religious) progressives” and non-Christians argue that such displays violate the separation of church and state established by the First Amendment. And what most notably differs between the two groups –and fuels the controversy – are the two groups’ different understandings of the history of Christmas and of America itself.

According to most Christians upset about such objections (like [Palin](#), [Gibson](#), [Santorum](#) and [Nasfelli](#)), the holiday was originally and is primarily a Christian holiday. We celebrate on December 25 because that is when Jesus was born and we give gifts to each other because the Magi gave gifts to Jesus. In other words, “Jesus is the reason for the season.” Of course, secular forces have tried to take advantage of such traditions—“St. Nicholas” was turned into Santa Claus, and retailers promote the idea of lavish gift giving. As a result, Santa Claus and consumerism get too much of the focus—but that’s all the more reason to remind people about the “true meaning of Christmas” and to “keep Christ in Christmas.” Ultimately an “attack” against any element of Christmas—especially a religious symbol like a nativity—is an attack against Christianity itself, and thus must be opposed.

Further, such Christians suggest, since Christmas is a Christian holiday, and has been nationally recognized since America’s founding, it is perfectly appropriate for government organizations to display religious symbols, such as a nativity—just as they always have. They believe that this is simply how Christmas always has been, and should be, celebrated. Following this logic, unless you think the government should not recognize Christmas as a holiday at all, you cannot object to the government



Christmas nativity scene next to the Franklin County Courthouse, Brookville, Indiana
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displaying religious symbols in observance of it. And clearly the government should recognize Christmas as a national holiday. It's a Christian holiday and the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation. "What about the separation of church and state?" you ask. That phrase does not even appear in the Constitution. As long as the government doesn't create a state mandated religion, there is no problem. After all, "In God We Trust" is our national motto, and is on all our money. So why shouldn't Jesus' birth be recognized, with appropriate religious symbolism, by the government?

Seculars (such as [Flynn](#), [Menendez](#) and [Boston](#)) and non-Christians (such as [Dershowitz](#)) disagree. The United States was not founded as a Christian nation; the Founding Fathers were products of the Enlightenment. Some of the most noteworthy ones (e.g., Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin) were Deists, many were highly skeptical of Christianity, and most were weary of the infusion of religion with government (which had caused much bloodshed in their home country of England). This is why they prescribed in the Constitution that there should be no religious test to hold government office, and that

Congress should not pass a law that respects a religious establishment, including the endorsement of any particular religion. After all, "In God We Trust" was only adopted as our national motto, and put on our paper money, in the wake of WWII—the same era that gave rise to the [McCarthy Hearings](#)—when Americans were desperate to distinguish themselves from the "godless communists."

Given such views, you might expect such people to suggest that Christmas should not be a federally recognized holiday. However, most do not feel this way because, they suggest, despite the fact that the Church placed it on its calendar, "Christmas" is not a Christian or religious holiday. According to secularists, it was originally a pagan holiday, and has been primarily a secular celebration throughout its history. Christians have tried numerous times to co-opt it—to claim it for Jesus and make it their own—but such efforts have been unsuccessful. They have added religious elements to their own celebrations, such as nativity displays, but, in general, holiday celebrations have remained secular, even after people started calling it "Christmas." Evergreens, gift giving, feasting, singing – nearly everything we associate with the holiday is of secular origin. Insisting that a government participate, and thus tacitly endorse, the Christian way of celebrating – e.g., by putting up a nativity – is just the latest in a long line of Christian efforts to "Christianize" Christmas, and to reinforce the notion that the U.S. is the "Christian nation" they believe our founders created. This, of course, must be fought given the dangers of mixing religion with government.

As you can see, the passion and fervor on both sides makes sense given the historical assumptions of each. But who's right? Fortunately, this is not a debate about religious doctrine, but largely about historical facts which can be researched and verified. Of course, you have to be careful to avoid the propaganda on both sides, but honest research will reveal that, for the most part, the secular progressives and non-Christians are right—especially about Christmas. (See, for example, the work of historians [Nissenbaum](#) and [Count](#) and Christian authors such as [Forbes](#) and [Joseph Kelly](#).)

December celebrations – including gift giving, friend visiting, social inversion (e.g. favoring of the poor) and feasting – date back 2000 years before the birth of Jesus. Christians didn't celebrate their own birthdays, much less Jesus', for about the first 350 years of their history. And when they did, December 25 was chosen, not



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because that is [when Jesus was born](#), but because that is when people were already celebrating. Saturnalia, the Roman harvest festival, occurred in late December; and on December 25, the followers of Sol Invictus (the sun god) were busy celebrating his birthday. Christianity, it seems, borrowed the idea of late December celebrations, and even the December 25th birth date, from pagan religions.

(This is not uncommon. All religions borrow, especially from religions that they compete with or overtake, and it is well known that Christianity borrowed many things from pagan religions—especially from sun worship. This is why early Jesus' iconography was based on Apollo (another sun god), and the church moved its day of worship from the Jewish Sabbath (Friday evening to Saturday evening) to the holy day of sun worshipers: *Sunday*.)

The church tried to Christianize the holiday – with nativities, midnight masses, and naming the holiday “Christmas” in the 11th century—but celebrations in the general public remained primarily secular throughout the Middle Ages. They were so secular in fact that Puritans, both in 17th and 18th century England and New England, banned the observance of Christmas. And when Christmas made its comeback in the early 1800s (it wasn't nationally recognized in the U.S. until 1870), it was only due to secular forces like Charles Dickens, Queen Victoria and Clement Clarke Moore. Even Santa Claus has pagan origins, tracing—not back to the Christian St. Nicholas—but to a pagan “[wild man](#)” fertility god often called “claus” (which is short for Niklaus). Not until it became clear that Christmas was here to stay did Christians rekindle their efforts to claim the holiday for themselves with mantras such as “Jesus is the reason for the season.” Yet the most popular Christmas [traditions](#), [movies](#) and [songs](#) remain secular. As historian Stephen Nissenbaum put it in [The Battle for Christmas](#), “Christmas has always been an extremely difficult holiday to *Christianize*.” (p. 8)

The history of America's founding is a little dicier, especially regarding the intentions of the founding fathers, an admittedly diverse group. Although it's true that important founders were highly skeptical of Christianity, the large majority were Protestant Christians. Yet, given their experience with the dangers of religion infused government, and the fact that they didn't delegate powers to the government to favor a religion, Federal neutrality regarding religion would likely have been their desire. After all, although the exact words are not in the first amendment, Jefferson did declare that it established a “separation of church and state”; and John Adams wrote that “the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.”

But, if neutrality was the founder's goal, it was not accomplished. Paid congressional chaplains saying Christian prayers, thanksgiving proclamations with Christian language, and encouragement of schools for (among other things) “religious” education were common. Congress even paid Priests to educate and catechize Native Americans. As Constitutional scholar Joseph Story put it, “Probably...the general...sentiment in America was that Christianity ought to receive encouragement from the state...utter indifference [regarding religion] ...would have created universal disapprobation.” (Section 444) But, of course, such things tell us about the attitude of the largely Christian populace of the time, and about how things worked in practice when governing such a populace, not the intentions of the founders as they drafted the constitution. After all, even though James Madison (in his elder years) admitted that he thought paid chaplains and presidentially declared days of prayer were unconstitutional, he (while president) paid chaplains and declared days of prayer.

Where American history starts to unquestionably favor the argument against courthouse nativities is in the 1940s when legal precedent was set regarding how the fourteenth amendment should be interpreted. Specifically, the Supreme Court interrupted “equal protection of the laws” to entail that citizens much be treated, by the government, with equal respect and concern—and that it does not do this to non-Christian citizens when it endorses Christianity. In addition, its due process clause made key provisions of the bill of rights, including the first amendment, apply to state and local governments.

The first legal action taken against a crèche was in 1969 when the ACLU represented (ironically) three clergymen and an atheist who objected to a crèche erected in D.C. (They eventually won.) The first Supreme Court case regarding Christmas displays was in 1984, with another in 1989 . In short, the Court ruled that government Christmas displays are unconstitutional if they endorse or convey a religious message. This produced the “Reindeer Rule”, which called for equal representation for non-religious Christmas symbols. Consequently, to avoid legal battles, many local governments erect secular decorations along with their crèche; others simply open up a public space for anyone to display their holiday decoration of choice. While others just pay lip service to the

rule, erecting only small Mr. and Mrs. Santa Clauses far behind the crèche, still, others ignore the rule entirely. This year, a few southern states have even passed or proposed “Merry Christmas Laws” that directly contradict the Court’s rulings. The battle continues.

To be fair, of course, not all Christians are unfamiliar with the factual history of Christmas and America’s founding, but not all Christians like courthouse nativities. They recognize the need for church/state separation, and object to such displays for the same reason as seculars and non-Christians. Nativities are for display at a church, and at a Christian’s home—not the Courthouse.

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[David Kyle Johnson](#) is an associate professor of philosophy at King’s College in Pennsylvania. He has published in journals such as [Religious Studies](#), [Sophia](#), [Philo](#) and [Think](#) and has done extensive work using popular culture to explain and illustrate philosophical ideas and arguments. He has edited books on [Inception](#), [Heroes](#) and [Introducing Philosophy through Pop Culture](#) and written articles on everything from [South Park](#), [The Hobbit](#), and [Doctor Who](#) to [The Onion](#), [Quentin Tarantino](#) and [Christmas](#). He is currently working on a book titled *The Myths That Stole Christmas: Seven Misconceptions that Hijacked the Holiday and How We Can Take it Back*.



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